



anirvachanIya



First Definition – Putran Maheshwar

anirvachanIya may be translated as "inexplicable" or "indefinable".

I. Basic review

Advaita philosophy affirms a non-dual substratum Reality ([brahman](#)) behind the manifold universe of our experience. The common analogy is that of the rope being seen as a snake in dull light; similarly Brahman is seen as the universe in the context of upAdhi-s (or avidyA, or [mAvA](#)).

This "context of upAdhi-s" defines the subject-object divide in consciousness. It is non-absolute (relative, "ever changing") and hence unreal. The effect/correspondence to this divide is the superimposition of duality (ego-world/God), again non-absolute and unreal. (The upAdhi-s or limiting-adjuncts determine the frames of reference relative to which Brahman appears in such and such manner.)

II. The individual

Now who asks a question? The individual.

The individual is ('continually') predefined through/in the upAdhi-s and so is the universe that is (seemingly) "observed and analysed". For the individual however, observation, analysis and conclusion are real processes. The referential context, though evidently non-absolute, is continually regarded as real unto itself, and duality/change is affirmed as the only truth.

III. What to ask?

Any valid question that the individual may hope to answer must therefore lie within the bounds of the starting assumption of individuality. We may ask about the body, mind, world, and of change/relativity. Firm belief in [karma](#)-karmaphala (cause-effect) corresponds with our starting assumption and serves as the basis for our answers.

We may also enquire regarding the enquirer, the witness to all. Who am I? A rational enquiry will perhaps conclude that the Self is non- different from the context of upAdhi-s that defines the individuality and thereby characterizes the Self either as ephemeral consciousness or as the product of material law. Thus the individual ever aware of its own non-absolute status convinces itself that the Self is also unreal, and that the inescapable proclamation of "I am" from within is sheer imagination.

IV. Anirvachaniya (one attempt)

According to advaita however, the Self/I is the non-dual Reality (brahman) that in the referential context appears divided as ego and world. This conclusion is transcendental, beyond the individual's reach. Itself a product of superimposition and pertaining to upAdhi-s, the individual cannot fathom the Self/Brahman nor can it hope to answer questions of "how/why this Real appears thus unreal?" The answer to such questions is "anirvachanIya" - inexplicable. At best, the individual can assess what is truth in the referential contexts: karma, [Ishvara](#), big-bang, etc, or what the scripture says is the underlying Truth (devoid of individuality) of all referential versions of existence.

V. Anirvachaniya (another attempt)

Duality is real/true in the individual's referential context ([vyAvahArika](#)) and yet unreal/non-existent in the "context of Brahman" ([pAramArthika](#)), i.e. devoid of the "context of upAdhi-s". In view of this dichotomy, advaita classifies the status of duality as anirvachanIya or indefinable. It exists (as if real) relative to a referential context (individuality) that is concurrent with it and 'vanishes' (into the Real) with the surrender of individuality 'in' Brahman. Questions regarding its origin and nature can either be answered within a relative context (for instance, Ishvara, big-bang, etc.) or by simply pinpointing the fact of questioning itself. Why universe? - Because individual. Why duality? - because you see it. It is the avidyA or ignorance of the questioner that this world is.

This type of answer is given because the questions do not belong in the context of brahman. If the questioner retains individuality (as real), the best answer is Ishvara (or karma-karmaphala) and not (nirguNa) brahman - Ishvara brings forth this duality through His power of mAyA and is the antaryAmin (inner

controller) of all beings. Such an answer is either a correct reply to a weaker empirical question, or simply a disguised way of saying, "we don't know, ultimately" to those who seek a deterministic response. Duality is an inexplicable fact of experience for the mind experiencing; it is anirvachanIya. The goal is to realize the non-dual Truth/Unity (that "aham brahmAsmi") and not to dwell upon the duality for its own sake; the latter method cannot resolve the problem of ignorance.

Note from Sunder Hattangadi:

The word 'anirvachanIya' occurs in the following upaniShad-s:

Mandala-Brahmana 4:1;
Tripad-vibhuti-mahanarayana 7:7;
Niralamba 5;
Yogatattva 1:7;
Paingala 1:2

Shankara has used the word anirvachanIya in:

Upadeshasahasri # 18 in Prose section, and
Vivekachudamai #109 (# 111 in Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan edition).

Dr. K. Sadananda adds:

The simplest definition of anirvachanIya is anirvachanIya itself: "that which cannot be defined."

Definition – S. N. Sastri

The word 'anirvachanIya' is derived from the verbal root 'vac' which means 'to say' or 'to describe'. 'vachanIya' means 'what can be described', 'nirvachanIya' means 'what can be specifically described'. 'anirvachanIya' therefore means 'what cannot be specifically described'. The word 'anirvachanIya' can be used in any situation where we want to say that something is incapable of being described in specific terms. In advaita vedAnta it has been given a specific meaning. In the context of advaita vedAnta we have to add the words 'as real or as unreal', so that the meaning becomes 'what cannot be specifically described as real or as unreal'.

Though the word 'anirvachanIya' is often used by itself in advaitic literature, it is understood to stand for 'sattvena asattvena vA anirvachanIya). The world is 'sattvena asattvena vA anirvachanIya, i.e., it cannot be described as either real or unreal. It does not have the same reality as brahman, nor is it unreal like the horn of a rabbit. It has vyAvahArika reality only. anirvachanIya thus has the same meaning as 'mithyA'.

As regards the term 'upAdhi', its derivation is – upa samIpe svIyam dharmam AdadhAti—which means—upAdhi is that which transmits its own quality to some thing near it. The pot gives to the total space surrounding it its own qualities of being of a particular size and shape. Space looks as if it has taken on the size and shape of the pot. The mind gives its quality of thinking to the Self and so it appears as if the Self is thinking, and so on with all other upAdhis such as gross body, etc.

Other essays on this topic may be found at the [Oneness Commitment](#) site.

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